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## Introduction: Religious Architecture in the Roman Empire, East and West

Edmund Thomas

In religion as in other spheres of ancient life the effectiveness of architecture as a medium of expression is easy to see, but it is harder to judge how the layout of religious buildings reflected local or universal ideas. In each of the three cases considered here can be seen the inadequacy of the visible or documented archaeological record for effectively mapping the complex parameters of belief in historical societies or the vicissitudes of religious practices that were not always constrained by the imprint of architectural structures. It is equally evident that changes in architectural space in religious complexes have other than religious reasons and are usually also the result of a combination of specific political and economic shifts and broader historical developments. Yet there still emerge some salient lessons for illuminating the processes by which religious identities were moulded in response to and in spite of larger political and societal transformations. The three papers here consider the vital role played by the architectural design of religious complexes in Italy and the East and West of the empire in shaping urban space.

Stamper presents the traditional 'top-down' colonial model according to which the Roman Capitoline ideology moved down from the acropolis of a city to determine the organization of central civic space. The reading by Frank Brown, one of the foremost interpreters of Roman architecture and sacred space, of the results of the 1960s excavations of the acropolis at Cosa remains the most penetrating reconstruction of how Roman belief systems were expressed in architecture and how Roman architecture was above all not only 'an art of shaping space around ritual' (Brown 1961, 9), but a theatre of ideas. In recent decades, however, the rigidity of this model has been questioned,<sup>1</sup> and the 'ideal' framework of a city's foundation, structured in religious ideology, developed by Brown's colleague Joseph Rykwert,<sup>2</sup> is challenged in many scholarly accounts of city foundations. Likewise, it is no longer fashionable to see the ubiquitous mark of a Roman 'state religion' as a decisive factor in colonial foundations.<sup>3</sup> Not every detail of the conclusions is unavoidable. The

archaeological evidence from recent surveys on the Capitoline in Rome<sup>4</sup> does not rule out the traditional reconstruction,<sup>5</sup> and even at Cosa the evidence can be interpreted in a less hierarchical manner.<sup>6</sup> Yet the impact of the Capitoline ideology on Sulla's colonization of Samnite Pompeii, turning a cult of Jupiter which had been probably the least dominating of its three main religious foci into a triumphalist statement framed by freestanding arches, remains a sobering, if not chilling, warning of the transformation of central ritual spaces as a result of military conquest. The inclusion of three vaulted rooms at the back of the former Temple of Jupiter easily adjusted the Hellenistic plan and aesthetics to Roman religious principles, whereas, conversely, the Capitoline temple at Rome found cosmetic changes to fit Hellenic notions of *symmetria* and *eurythmia* while not affecting its basic plan which remained unchanged throughout the imperial period. On the other hand, while the Roman Capitoline temple became a crystallization of imperial ritual and a sacralization of its foreign policy,<sup>7</sup> physically and symbolically aloof from the domestic civic centre, the Pompeian temple was welded into an organic ensemble of political practice and colonial civic government.

In the western empire architectural variety matched diversity in religious practice. A mixture of Roman influence and local or regional traditions can be seen in the restoration of native sanctuaries in the western empire in the Flavian period, at Munigua in Baetica (southern Spain) and in Britain at Bath (*Aquae Sulis*). At Munigua the difficulty of inference from archaeological evidence is particularly acute. A superficial similarity of the architectural structures to Republican Latin terrace sanctuaries<sup>8</sup> seems undermined by the presence of three distinct temples. A modest quantity of ambiguous epigraphy only obfuscates the issue. Religious activity is hard to decipher. Cultic acts apparently central to the sacred site - sacrifice at Munigua and dedication of medical *ex votos* at Bath - are hard to locate, leaving the counter-intuitive conclusion that the terrace sanctuary was characterized by individual dedications, whereas

the healing site was a zone of sacrifice. But in each case the culture of classicism set a compelling standard for the presentation of local ritual, whether through the ornament of polychrome marbles, as at Munigua, or the addition, at Bath, not just of a pedimented entrance porch, but also of Roman urbanizing features, bath buildings and porticoes, which produced a new synthesis of bathing and religion.<sup>9</sup> While the performance of ritual was always more important than the physical environment, architectural demands were nonetheless pressing. At Munigua visibility was the primary requirement, and at Bath the reworking of ritual is amply testified by architectural renovation and decoration.

A similar impact of religious building on the civic centre can be seen at the *municipium* of Baelo Claudia, in the three structures erected on the raised north side of the forum. For little reason more than their triadic juxtaposition, these temples have usually been identified as a Capitoli-um.<sup>10</sup> They share a single altar, on the platform in front of the temples. The principle of visibility locates these together above the civic space of the forum. Their formal architectural similarity to the three temples at Sufetula (Sbeitla) in North Africa, located directly on the forum, does not imply any shared features of cult.<sup>11</sup> Inconsistencies between the decorative appearance and the archaeological date of the structures,<sup>12</sup> as elsewhere in the peninsula, are problematic. The introduction of a temple of Isis alongside the three temples<sup>13</sup> introduces a further complication of religious practice and a corresponding permeability of architectural form.

In the eastern empire the temple of Zeus at Gerasa (Jerash) combined a high place tradition with a covered naos structure, which evolved with the growing wealth of the sanctuary in the event of Pompey's conquest of the region and the formation of the province of Syria. The resulting monumentalization through temenos and terrace structures was owed to the originality and self-expression of the architect Diodoros,<sup>14</sup> and the sanctuary was newly dedicated to Olympian Zeus. The construction of the north-east entrance, in particular, produced a civic orientation of the sanctuary, addressing a point of public focus through the unique lens of the Oval Piazza, yet in a way which could be seen as mirroring the civic orientation of temples at Cosa and Pompeii. This could be contrasted with the location of the sanctuary of Bel at Palmyra, which remained isolated from the urban plan until the construction of the Severan arch. Yet the three separate rooms of the

temple of Zeus created on the upper terrace in 163 C.E. should discourage the desire always to see in such tripartite formations a statist Capitoline idea, as this is rather more likely to have been determined by the continuation of local traditions.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Fentress 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Rykwert 1976.
- <sup>3</sup> Bispham 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Mura Sommella 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Gjerstad 1960.
- <sup>6</sup> Bispham 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Purcell 2003, 29-33.
- <sup>8</sup> Coarelli 1987.
- <sup>9</sup> Laurence, Esmonde Cleary and Sears 2011, 222.
- <sup>10</sup> Bonneville et al. 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> Barresi 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Sillières 1994-95.
- <sup>13</sup> Dardaine et al. 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Seigne 2008.

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